

Rep. Doris Matsui Continues Fight to Make Cruise Vacations Safe for American Families

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Thurs., March 12, 2009

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Introduces Comprehensive Cruise Safety Bill

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Today, Rep. Doris Matsui (D-CA) and Senator John Kerry (D-MA) introduced the Cruise Vessel Security and Safety Act of 2009 to keep Americans aware and protected while on cruise vacations.

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For Rep. Matsui, the call to action came when one of her constituents, Laurie Dishman, wrote to her for help in April, 2006. Ms. Dishman was the victim of a sexual assault while on a cruise vacation, and was given no assistance by the cruise line in properly securing evidence of the assault, identifying her attacker who was an employee of the cruise ship, or prosecuting the crime once back on shore. Frustrated, Ms. Dishman reached out to her Congresswoman for help.

"With news coverage of a recent rape by a crewmember on a Princess Cruise almost exactly three years after Laurie's, it is clear that legislation is necessary. We learned during Congressional hearings that there has not been a conviction of an accused rape in recent history. This legislation would increase safety, keep passengers informed, and improve crime scene preservation efforts," stated Rep. Matsui.

Rep. Matsui called for multiple hearings that brought key executives in the cruise industry to testify before Congress. Sen. John Kerry took up the cause in the Senate, holding a hearing as well. Despite these fact-finding missions, the cruise industry has not yet taken sufficient action to regulate itself, spawning the need for comprehensive legislation.

"The term 'duty free' does not apply to the safety of passengers - the industry needs to act responsibly. Cruise ships need to report crimes so that justice can be served and criminals can be held accountable," said Senator Kerry. "All crimes, regardless of a cruise ship's shifting international jurisdiction, must be reported, investigated, or prosecuted. We owe it to law-abiding citizens like Ken Carver who have lost loved ones on these ships to hold the industry's feet to the fire and make sure this never happens again."

"It is heartbreaking to hear the shocking tales of good people who have suffered, and futilely sought recourse in the wake of an assault or crime. Our work will not be done until the cruise industry has stepped up and taken the necessary measures to provide a reasonable level of security for their customers. I will continue to fight to make sure that no person falls victim to harm on board a cruise ship as a result of inadequate oversight, reporting and safety precautions," stated Rep. Matsui.

Rep. Matsui is a leading advocate in Congress for cruise safety, and welcomed the unequivocal support of Reps. John Lewis (D-GA), Carolyn Maloney (D-NY), and Ted Poe (R-TX). Together, they introduced the Cruise Vessel Security and Safety Act, while Sen. Kerry introduced companion legislation in the Senate in June of 2008. They are reintroducing the bill again this year with slight changes including adding language to prevent pirate attacks by enhancing and protecting vessel security zones.

The Cruise Vessel Security and Safety Act of 2009 incorporates the recommendations and priorities of the International Cruise Victims Association (ICV), a nonprofit organization that represents victims of crimes on cruise ships, as well as Rape, Abuse, Incest National Network (RAINN). Kendall Carver, President of ICV indicated strong support for the bill that is being introduced in both the House and Senate.

"Our organization and other victims of cruise crimes have met numerous times with cruise lines executives in an effort to have them voluntarily take the necessary steps as outlined in our proposals. That resistance to change is a clear signal to us that the only alternative left is for the United States Congress to move forward with legislation," stated Carver.

"RAINN applauds Congresswoman Matsui for her continuing leadership on this issue and commends her for including a provision in this legislation that would ensure that sexual assault victims on cruise ships can have immediate access to vitally needed forensic, medical, and support services," stated Scott Berkowitz, president & founder of RAINN.

The legislation would:

Improve Ship Safety. The legislation would mandate that: guard rails reach 54 inches in height; entry doors of each passenger stateroom and crew cabin have peep holes, security latches, and time sensitive key technology. Ship owners would be required to implement fire safety codes as well as technology to detect when a passenger falls overboard.

Procedures would be established to determine which crew members have access to staterooms and when. Ship owners would be required to equip their vessels with a sound warning system capable of communicating with other nearby vessels inside the surrounding security zone.

- Provide Transparency in Reporting. The legislation would establish a reporting structure based on the current voluntary agreement in place between the cruise industry, the FBI, and the Coast Guard. Additionally, each ship would be required to maintain a log book, which would record all deaths, missing individuals, alleged crimes, and passenger/crewmember complaints regarding theft, sexual harassment, and assault. The log books would be available to FBI and Coast Guard electronically, as well as to any law enforcement officer upon request. Statistical information would be posted on a public website maintained by the Coast Guard.

- Improve Crime Scene Response. Each ship would be required to maintain anti-retroviral medications and medications used to prevent sexually transmitted diseases after assault, as well as equipment and materials for performing a medical examination to determine if a victim has been raped. A United States licensed medical practitioners would be on every ship to perform the necessary examinations and to administer treatment. Private medical information would be protected, and would require written authorization for release. Additionally, all passengers would be given free, immediate, and confidential access to a National Sexual Assault Hotline and the FBI.

- Improve Training Procedures. The legislation would establish a program designed by the Coast Guard and the FBI, and certified by the Administrator of the Maritime Administration, to train appropriate crewmembers in crime scene investigation. Each ship would be required to maintain one crewmember trained and certified under such a program.

- Enforce Safety and Environmental Standards. The Coast Guard is authorized to dispatch personnel to monitor discharge of waste, to verify logbook entries related to waste treatment and disposal, and to act as public safety officers by securing and collecting evidence of alleged crimes. The bill also establishes fair and equal remedies for persons injured in boating disasters. Additionally, the Secretary of the Coast Guard shall conduct a study of passenger security needs and report findings/suggestions to Congress.

- Enhance and Protect Vessel Security Zones (Anti-Piracy). The legislation would enhance the cruise ship's communication and warning capability to enforce the Coast Guard security zones in U.S. ports of up to 500 yards.

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